1: Tew E-4 (no date) 1950 FT7 Yao FT7



### Land Tenure

The rules governing land tenure were those which would be expected of a society which suffered from no land shortage. A man was entitled to as much land as he could cultivate, the limitation being that he should consult the headman as to his neighbours' boundaries. Abandoned gardens could only be taken up with the permission of the original cultivator.[1]

## MAIN CULTURAL FEATURES

### Religion

The Yao are largely Islamized. Codrington remarked that the perpetuation of this faith was distinctly antagonistic to British influence, and it received considerable attention from chiefs and headmen. Schools for the instruction of youth in reading and writing Swahili in Arabic characters were established in nearly every village, where also prayers were made at regular intervals in the day. The Moslem fasts and feasts were also observed, and the Yao were not inclined to embrace Christianity.[2] Their conversion to Islam did not take place till the nineteenth century, long after their first introduction to the Arab traders at Kilwa and Zanzibar, although they had adopted Swahili modes of dress much earlier.[3]

According to Hetherwick, Islam is strongest on the lake shore and on the east border of Nyasaland, chiefly round the old slave-trade centres. Makanjira's on the south-east side of the lake, and Domira Bay on the west, were the centres of Moslem propaganda. The Moslem population around Zomba and Blantyre consists mainly of Yao men, who have built themselves mosques in their own villages, or use the large mosques of Indian Moslem merchants. In the west districts, lower Shire, Ruo, central Shire, Lilongwe, Fort Manning, the Moslem population does not total more than 732. In the districts round Fort Johnston and Kotakota, the Moslems are one-ninth of the total population, while in Zomba district they number one-fifth.[4]

The Yao pagan religion was a form of ancestor worship. Apart from diviners and medicine men, there was no regular priestly profession. Intercession with the ancestors was performed by the chief, on behalf of the chiefdom, by the headman on behalf of the village, and by the head of the matrilineal kin for his dependents.[5] A man was qualified to approach his ancestors individually only if he had been initiated and had a house of his own.[6]

Some of the ritual duties of the chief have already been mentioned. When his people were visited by drought or epidemic, or when he fixed the day for the beginning of the millet harvest, he made an offering of flour and of beer poured into a pot in the ground at the grave of a dead chief. The village headman made similar offerings to the spirit of his dead predecessor. The spirits of the dead Nyanja chiefs, ousted by the Yao invasion, were regarded as still powerful in the homeland of their people. For instance, Kangumba, whose shrine was on Mount Soche, used to be appealed to for rain, and on the principle that the most appropriate mediator between a dead man and the living is a descendant of the former, the Yao chief, Kapeni, when he wished to propitiate

[1] Macdonald, 1882, vol. i, pp. 177–9; Stannus, a, 1913, p. 280.
[2] Codrington, 1898, p. 316; see also Maples, 3, 1873.
[3] Young, T. C., a, 1932, p. 33.
[4] Hetherwick, a, 1907, p. 110.
[5] Warren, 1908, p. 270; Stannus, a, 1910, p. 311.
[6] Macdonald, 1882, vol. i, p. 63.

Thagilaga was another well-known performer; he used to do the same tricks as Kambanje. He also was possessed of an elastic skin still in said to have been able "to tie his ears together behind the back of his head."

Mpachetula, a Yao of Mkanda, is a man with considerable renown. He is said to be able to produce a lion at will from a lion's tail and claw. He would offer to show this if there were any brave enough to go through with it. On a moonlight night, he would appear on the ground in a cleared space near a village the tail of a lion held cross-wise in a piece of split bamboo. At the split end of the bamboo, he would place a lion's claw and round this, a woman's belt held in position by three bamboo pegs, around which he would draw a circle of mkapasi flour. Everyone would then withdraw to a hut in which the seance was to take place. After an hour or so, Mpachetula would send some one out to inspect the lion's tail where probably all would be found intact. He might then pretend to be uninterested and sleepy and suggest that some one should go out again in half an hour. Sooner or later, a man would come back, having found the tail gone; then everyone would go out to see what had happened. The pegs would be found in place but the tail and claw gone. A little way off, the split piece of bamboo would be found and further still a head or two from the woman's belt. These, Mpachetula would pick up, and leaving a little trail of flour on their way, all returned to the hut, while he whistled as if calling some one. Suddenly they would be aroused by the sound as of a lion breaking against the hut walls, as the beast only knows to do, and next, a loud roar. Mpachetula would immediately open the door half-way so that the people could look out into the moonlight and there, a little way off, would be the lion. It would immediately advance towards the house and then, as it prepared to spring for the door, Mpachetula would offer it some of the flour in his left hand, armed with a stirring-stick, knife, in his right hand. As the lion landed, he would strike it on the head with the stick and lo and behold! the lion would vanish and the tail and claw would be found in his hand.

Superstitions. Scattered throughout these notes, particularly under Umoni and Diwana, mention is made of practices which show a strong belief in superstition. Below are given a number of minor beliefs, and it is interesting to compare them with many well-known superstitions in other parts of the world.

1. A child who cuts the upper incisor teeth first will be unlucky. Such children used to be killed by the Yao. (Other tribes make medicine against the threatened ill-luck.)

2. A woman with polydactylism may not take food out of a corn-store. Otherwise the stock of corn will not last long. (Rudimentary sixth fingers are not uncommon.)

3. An insect called chiqeno mosi which lives in the mud at the bottom of pools, if killed causes the water to dry up.

4. If a boy puts a water-spider in the armpit when learning to swim, he will learn quickly.

5. A man wishing to prevent rain falling on a day he is making a journey, will wrap some of the leaves of the mimosa tree in his kilo cloth and go without drinking.

6. It is believed that signs of guilt are visible in the eye of a murderer; medicine is procured in the hope of getting rid of these signs.

7. The possession of the hair of another person is supposed to give the possessor power over that person, hence a medicine man, when the patient he has been treating is cured, shaves the patient and keeps the hair until payment is made.

8. A native with light greenish-grey eyes is not to be trusted. He is said to have eyes like a cat and is called *mujo'(jiri)*; these eyes are rare among natives.

9. It is unlucky for a child to get into a basket; he may be battued.

10. Should a woman turn the porridge pot upside down, every one who has eaten will become constipated. For the same reason, a woman, after turning out the porridge from the pot, just touches the top of the mass of porridge with the bottom of the pot.

11. A woman will never leave the pounding stick in the grain-mortar. Should she do so, the heavens would fall.

12. When a zebra is killed, a knot is tied in its tail so that eating of the meat shall not cause indigestion.

13. It is unlucky to sit upon a headrest, the mavwile. The person would surely be bitten by a snake.

14. If a man commits murder, and his wife is pregnant at the time, she must sleep on the spear used.

15. Children are told that they must not eat at night; that if they are hungry, they must be quiet and try to go to sleep again. If they don't obey and sit up eating porridge, a long hairy arm will come through the fastened door and beg for some, the voice of the unseen saying:

"*Kpwa shimbati'shwai wanga ni ngiwe!*"
"Give me that which you put in your mouth and throw away."

the repeated movements of the hand to the mouth (*wwe*) and back to the pot being supposed to make the "beggy" think that they are not really eating but merely swelling and throwing away the food.

16. A male should not scrape the porridge off the porridge stick; this is only allowed to the woman. Should a man do so, it is supposed that when he goes hunting, he will hit anything he shoots at, only in the tail.

17. There is a saying that the men and boys may eat little pieces of porridge which fall out of the pot, while cooking, on to the supporting stones and it will give them power to escape unhurt from battle. The fragments are called *nyakyenda*, (from *ku-kyenda* "to escape").

18. Children are instructed to take their food sitting down instead of being in a hurry and standing to take it. They are told that if they do not obey, their porridge will not go into their stomachs but into their legs and swell out their knee-joints.

18. That portion of the gut of animals having folds of coarse membranous tackle, may be eaten only by old people past the child-propagating age. If a young woman should eat it, she would have difficulty in labor.

19. It is believed that people who eat too freely of a little fish like whitebait called *mutemba* get obstruction of the bowel by the wedging together of the bones. The treatment adopted is to pass up the rectum a smooth stick with a pad of rag at the end. This cannot be done by the person himself and as the aid of another has to be called in, only an intimacy, such as the relationship of brother-in-law gives, will warrant this service being asked.

20. The Yao believe that there is a little insect which lives in the ear, called *chinyene kyilombo*, which tells the person what is said to him, the wax in the ear being its resort. The pupil is called *mwanache jwa lisu*, the child of the eye.

21. Among women, the uterus is called *nyenze* (*nyo* = eye). It is supposed to be a little person who holds the foetus. When the child is born, nervous women feel it and starts looking about, the movements causing the afterpains.

22. A man making his first journey to the coast used to sprinkle himself with water from every stream he crossed to give him a safe journey. In the same way, women at the present day going between Zomba and Blantyre sprinkle their babies with water from each stream.

24. An ant-like insect called *mbyamtende* (*bandolomdo*, Chin.) *likaphidwa mwiluwanji* is lucky. On seeing it a native puts its belly and then rubs his own, wishing for plenty of food that day. If he is embarking on a journey or beginning some enterprise, he will wrap one of these insects in a fold of his bale cloth and take it with him for luck.

25. When a native hears the *mwipe* bird call (its call is like the *mew* of a cat), if he wants something, he immediately says, "Oh *mwipe*, I want so-and-so. Be quiet and I will then be quiet, too!" If the bird ceases calling, he knows the wish will be granted. The female bird is said to be the more certain prophet.

26. The snake, *nakalukuti*, which lives in trees and is of a buff clay color with green markings, is said by natives to pierce the chest and tie a knot in itself on each side so that it can only be withdrawn by cutting off one knot. When the snake is thus withdrawn, its blood mixes with that of the man and he will die.

27. Natives have a habit of marking the spot where any event takes place by a stone by the side of the path, and every passer-by will add a stone for luck. In this way some large piles of stones have been made.

28. A man resting on his way home from a long journey places a stone in the fork between the branches of a nearby tree, so that on his arrival he may find his wife has put by some food for him and has not used up the day's stock of flour.

29. A shameless beast digging in the path is said to presage the death of the father's nearest relative.

30. If a chameleon is found holding on to the grass at both sides of the path, the path is " closed " and a man will turn back to his home and not proceed on his journey. It would be unlucky to continue.

31. Snakes seen in evils are a bad omen.

32. The slow-worm known as *Mamdoala mamgoala* (" the entire eyes of ant hills "), and the scaly ant-eater, if seen on the path, are of bad import.

33. To knock the toes against a stone on a journey is bad luck; if blood flows from the big toe, it points to good luck.

34. A man knocking the side of his foot against a stone knows that some one is speaking ill of him.

35. A person whose hands itch knows he will receive a present.

36. Tremor of the circumorbital muscles of the right eye indicates that something good will be seen. When the left eye is affected, the outcome is less sure.

37. The cry of the bird *nguhululu* (the green turaco), indicates to the hearer that he is about to meet some one, either friend or enemy.

38. Anyone who kills one of the large stork-hamerkop (*Phoeniculus*) knows no *chikuza chiziya*, will always be breaking the cooking pots afterwards.

39. The natives believe that the caterpillar of the *Hippotion osiris* moth will jump at the hearer. It is called *chinembila mawulo*, " that which jumps at the breasts," and children seeing it will cover up their nipples with their hands.

40. *Of Lizards*, the Mangoone, there is a saying:

" *Linsila pepwitelangwa ndeke* "
" The hundred mangoone relieve each other (at) the navel "

It is said that mangoone assist one another when being hunted. When one is tired, a fresh one runs in so close to the pursuer that he goes after this one and leaves the tired one, and so they keep it up till the pursuer is exhausted.

41. *Chisola*, the frog. Children are told they must never kill a frog, or his spirit will come at night with porridge made of excrement and make them eat it. If a small child playing with a frog kills it by mischance, he will tear off a small piece of his native cloth and place it by the frog as an offering.

42. *Chinyhindi* (*Silongwe*, Chin.) the weasel. It is said that the weasel hides its body and leaves exposed its nose, so that a chicken seeing it, goes up to peck at it, whereupon the weasel turns round quickly and catches the chicken with its mouth.

43. *Chinyewa*, the skunk (*from ku-nya*, to go to stool), so named on account of its odor, is said to apply the nose to a rat-hole and make wind. This will render insensible all the rats in the burrow and he can then dig them out at leisure.

44. *Mlondi*, the honey badger, when hunted is always said to attack a man by attempting to seize the testicles. Natives when they hunt this animal, tie stones in their kilts clothes so that they hang down between the legs to defend the badger.

771 ●
774
826
539

46. A child, when one of its milk teeth drops out, stands some five yards away facing the door of the hut and throws the tooth over the roof of the hut, saying:

"*Ali Mlungulu kino kyuwa ukye, nikosi kyanyo kyakhuwa kyo*"
"Oh! over tooth your there is, give me my of good one!"

771 **Religion.** The matter of the religious beliefs professed by natives of East Central Africa is one beset with many difficulties to the student of today. It has been the subject of many essays by workers in the missionary field, but the wide contact of the natives of Nyasaland with missionary effort during the past thirty years has done much to confuse the problem, and one feels that many missionaries in their writings rather color the picture with their own feelings.

771 761 774 I think probably the Yao with whom I am now concerned have a truer conception of their own beliefs than many of the subject tribes among whom mission teaching has more easily taken root. The religious beliefs of a people are to a large extent the reflection of the circumstances under which that people lives. The outstanding event to all natives is death. At death, something is lost to the body, without which life is impossible. This is the *mzimu* which may be translated "soul" or "spirit." The *mzimu* is said to leave the body of the dying man when he becomes moribund or unconscious. It appears that this same *mzimu* may leave the body during unconscious states unassociated with death, as when a man faints, in epilepsy, and during sleep.

774 Apart from this evidence of the dissociation of the *mzimu* from the living body, the Yao believe that a man's shadow is an objective manifestation of the soul and they will say "*the shadow is the mzimu.*" Fear is experienced if a man jumps on the shadow of his fellow. Light is also thrown on the constitution of the *mzimu* by the belief in a certain evil-spirit which dwells in deep pools. It is called *chimale-mzozi*, which means "one who may finish (drink up) all the water." The superstition regarding this evil spirit is that it can suck the blood from your shadow as you stand on the edge of the pool, till you become so weak that you fall in and are drowned.

774 776 *After* leaving the body at death, the *mzimu* goes to take up his place in the spirit-world, occupying a position corresponding to that held by the man during his life. With a truly materialistic conception, the soul is supposed to have all the attributes of the dead man, to be wealthy in proportion as the man was so on earth, and its relative position will be identical with that which he held among the living. The tribal *chief* becomes a paramount *chief* in the spirit world, the lesser *chiefs* holds sway in his lesser capacity, etc. We shall see that in intercession, when the tribe is threatened with calamities, it is the late paramount *chief* who is appealed to for help, and when one feudal *chief* is at war with another, the chief's dead predecessor will be called upon for aid. When a village is moved, it is from the spirit of the dead headman of the village that success in the enterprise is sought. Similarly, in family troubles, some dead ancestor is entreated to set things right, while a native

nor is he "God the creator," of man or earth. He, however, receives the spirits of the dead. Should he refuse to do so, a man continues to live. When a man has recovered from some commonly fatal disease, the natives say, "*Mulungu wakanda* (refused him)!" or if he has been very near to death and then recovers, they say "*Mulungu wamvula* (spat him out)".

It would thus appear that among the spirit hosts there is a regular law of precedence, and presiding over all is a supreme being, but all this is so remote as to have little importance for the living. The vagueness surrounding *Mulungu*, I must admit, has given rise to some doubt in my own mind as to how far he was a deity with an entity of his own in their religion of a little time ago.

Ancestors tend to be forgotten in proportion to the length of time which has elapsed since their death, unless they played some important part during their lives: then some particular one may be remembered to the exclusion of others, and to him prayers of intercession are offered. In the case of chiefs, the names of a long line of rulers may be recommended on occasions when all else about them has fallen into oblivion. It seems possible originally *Mulungu* was the oldest ancestral chief who was raised up as a supreme being but who, in the process, has lost all other attributes. On the other hand, the word often refers only to the place where the spirits dwell; this may have been the original meaning.

There is no religious worship in the proper sense of the term but only propitiation, prayer for intercession, and return of thanks for favors granted. The keynote of this ancestor worship, the sum total of their religion to the exclusion of the belief in a supreme being, is fear. We have seen at the funeral that everything is done to lay the spirit at rest. The people wish never to hear of the spirit again. It is chiefly with a view of preventing some evil that worship takes place or with a view of expiating some crime that sacrifice is made or to alleviate some suffering that communication is sought with the spirits. It is a question of, "Do us no harm, do not visit your wrath upon us for what we have left undone," rather than "Keep us from doing evil, save us from being our own enemies." It would appear to be a religion of spite, not of love and kindness, though there are glimmerings of a search after "a friend to guide and protect," as in the prayer given below and also in the action taken when removing a village.

As a corollary of this system of ancestor worship, there is no real priesthood. A man asks for favors for himself; the head of a family petitions a deceased father or some more remote ancestor of greater importance; the headmen intercede on behalf of the village with the spirit of a predecessor; a chief takes the place of high priest on the occasion of a tribal supplication to a former ruler, though he may be replaced by some one of his wise men who acts as intermediary.

Some form of sacrifice is offered with the prayer, and often some cause is sought as a sign that the prayer is granted. For this purpose, flour made from millet called *ulupesi* (*eleusine*, Chin.) is commonly used. The word *ulupesi* probably includes any sacrificial offerings.

776 origin of mankind is explained in a story given elsewhere; *Mulungu* takes no part, nor is
773 the supernatural even invoked to explanation.

791 The religion of the Yao may then be summed up as monistic worship plus an ill-defined, uncertain belief in a supreme being. Their religion is not animistic. There are certain spirits of evil, demons, fairies and supernatural beings and animals which, however, do not play any real part in their religious beliefs.

531 **Native Sayings.** Natives are very fond of sayings, many of which are of the same nature as our own proverbs. The meaning of many of them is, however, not always self-evident but depends on some little story with a moral.

The following are some of those which I have collected among the Yao near Lumbo:

1. *Akwanda likwakala!* (to tipsies)
   He caught a fish. (a mouse!)

An expression meaning "He slipped down." The variations being used when wet or when dry matter lost.

2. *Chenda ali n'mano!*
   Cunning is in the eye (wisdom).

An expression meaning "Look out; some one is after us!"

   *Kalula chenjera!*
   Rabbit be skilful!

This is a Mang'anja equivalent to the above.

3. *Chanyaliswa mwakhikhala manjemba!*
   A thing that did not know they cooked in among the herbs!

An insect which had not learned to advise about the dangers of sitting on herbs used as vegetables, was gathered up by a woman and cooked with them.
An expression used with the sense "If you do not take advice and anything happens to you, it will be *your own fault.*"

4. *Wisdo ali n'mapikwedo!*
   Medicine is in the nose!

Meaning "You are forewarned; it is your own look out!"

5. *Kanjakwesela mwakatuka chikhalamo!*
   Mr Would-Be-Clever they left with the skull!

*Ka-kalamoko*, to be clever (to show off); an expression made to a newcomer who unbidden joins in a discussion. It has reference to the following story and means that anyone joining a party unbidden may find himself in an awkward situation. Some strangers came to a village, and after being given food and quarters, all retired for the night. One of them, however, Mr. Would-Be-Clever, hearing something going on outside crept out of the house to find out what was happening. Seeing some people playing at catch-ball, he

7: Hetherwick M-S (ca. 1906) 1902 FT? Yao FT?



grass mats, bows, pumpkins, guns, etc., as a thanksoffering from the villagers for their harvest. This is described as *kulombo mulungu*, to worship *mulungu*. At the foot of the tree in the village courtyard, where the men sit and talk or work, an occasional small offering of flour or beer is placed on any special occasion in the life of the village or any of its inhabitants. This also is *kulombo mulungu*. A decent native sitting down to a meal will, before beginning to eat, take out a small morsel of the food before him and throw it at the root of the nearest tree as an offering to *mulungu*. On a journey a traveller will sometimes stop and lay a little flour in a pyramidal heap at the foot of a tree by the wayside or at an angle where two roads meet. This, like the others, is for *mulungu*, the spirit world, the guardian of the wayfarer on his journey.

Thus the Yao presents us with three stages of animistic belief —

(1) The lowest finds *mizimu* or shade, the agent in dreams, delirium, etc.

(2) This *kindoo* regarded as *mulungu*, and an object of worship and reverence, the controller of the affairs of this life, the active agent in the fortunes of the human race.

(3) And lastly, *mulungu* as expressing the great spirit agency, the creator of the world and all life, the source of all things animate and inanimate.

And yet between these three conceptions of the spirit nature no definite boundary line can be drawn. The distinction in the native mind is over of the faintest. No one will give you a dogmatic statement of his belief on such points.

It is only through long association with them in their daily life noting actual expressions of opinion or hearing of definite acts in relation to their worship or their dead, that one can get behind the reserve with which every Yao uses or avoids approaches or allusion to the spirit world which lies beyond and other this.

B.Mitchell B-5 (1940-1947) 1949
[P.151B] PIT.Yao PIT

563 to be initiated according to the Yao custom (Appendix). In general, the Nguru headmen are village headmen in the same way as the Yao are and they follow the same pattern in political behaviour.

58 At the moment, throughout the area, the
62 various tribal groups live in kinship clusters so that under one Yao administrative headman there may be two or three unrelated Yao kin-groups and possibly one or two Nguru groups living quite separately. Though the population in the area as a whole is mixed, usually the village groups are tribally homogeneous. So far little inter-marriage has taken place. I shall not here analyse this situation, though it is politically pregnant. In many ways the Nguru immigrants
[71] are more progressive than the Yao. Most Yao in this area are professed Moslems and do not attend the local schools which are Christian. However, the missions have been more successful among the Nguru and they are becoming more educated and advanced. A good proportion of the Government posts in the area is filled by Nguru for this reason. This is more significant in the context of the general situation as will become apparent in the description below. For the rest of the paper I shall consider the political structure as I see it, in terms of the social personalities in the structure, and the presence of these non-Yao groups is implicit in the rest of this analysis.

## V. The Political Structure

449
462 the Administration has persuaded the chief to
177 pass and the full significance of which lies in a system of European values. These systems of values are foreign to each other in many features. Opposition between the two groups, White and Black, must arise if their behaviour is affected by different sets of values. The Yao, for example, believe that most deaths are caused by sorcery and claim the right to take punitive measures against the sorcerer. The Whites do not believe in this and prevent punitive action against people

11: Sanderson D-1 (ca. 1920) 1920 FT7 Yao FT7

MS

# RELATIONSHIPS AMONG THE WAYAO.

By Maggetta Sanderson,
*Medical Officer, Nyasaland Protectorate.*

*Introductory.*—Various writers have attempted to give English equivalents to the Yao terms denoting relationship, or have alluded to the outstanding features of the system, but I am not aware that anybody has hitherto worked out the whole system.

Although it is very similar to other classificatory systems, I feel that a description of it may not be quite valueless, more especially on account of the evolutionary changes that are taking place.

The WaYao are a Bantu tribe, exogamous but not totemic, which until the middle of the last century inhabited that part of Central Africa lying to the East of Lake Nyasa, particularly in the valleys of the Lujenda and Rovuma rivers. Up to that time the tribe had not extended far from the area inhabited except perhaps in a northerly direction, but owing to constant internecine war in their own territory the Yaos there invaded and conquered a large part of the neighbouring territories, especially to the south, in what is now called Nyasaland.

I have said that the WaYao are not totemic, and that statement is correct at the present time. Opinions differ, however, as to how recent their loss of totemism is; though their initiation ceremonies are generally regarded as totemic, even there, in my opinion, the evidence is not conclusive, and there remains no suspicion of totemism outside those ceremonies.

It should be mentioned that Islam is much more prevalent among the Yaos than among their neighbours, but its influence is not yet so deep-rooted as greatly to obscure the pure tribal customs, except to a certain extent among the rising generation.

To facilitate description the relationships are given in tabular form, the relationship being given with reference to one man or woman.

In Table I, Column 1 describes the relationship, Column 2 gives either the nearest equivalent of the Yao term, or, if none, the actual terms. Columns 3-6 give the various relations of the person named in Column 1, as they would be named by the man or woman under consideration.

For example, the brother of (a)'s father (Column 1) is regarded as (a)'s father (Column 2), the wife of (a)'s father's brother is (a)'s stepmother (Column 3), their child a bit "brother" or "sister" (Column 4), and so on (see Table I).